

Essential Public Health Services

“The individuals who work in public health have entered the field from many professional disciplines—medicine, nursing, law, dentistry, teaching, social work, and even the ministry. When there’s a straightforward task to be done—inspecting restaurants, handing out a WIC voucher, or checking vital signs—it’s easy for everyone to see the purpose of public health and understand it. It’s much harder for staff to understand the “why” of public health—why we give immunizations, why community assessments are important and how all the work of public health is interconnected.” – Local health department director

The U.S. public health workforce consists of approximately 500,000 individuals currently employed by a range of organizations involved in public health practice including governmental public health agencies, other public sector agencies, health care delivery organizations, voluntary organizations, community-based groups, academia and other entities. The public health workforce is defined less by where they work than by what they do which is to provide essential public health services to communities throughout the nation. The essential services were listed in a statement *Public Health in America* in 1994.

The Public Health Functions Steering Committee, comprised of representatives of several national organizations and federal agencies involved in public health developed *Public Health in America* as a consensus statement “to explain what public health is; clarify the essential role of public health in the overall health system; and provide accountability by linking public health performance to health outcomes.” The statement provides a common vision for public health, “Healthy People in Healthy Communities,” as well as a mission, “To promote physical and mental health and prevent disease, injury and disability.” The **Essential Public Health Services** provides a list of ten public health services which define the practice of public health. (Table 1)

Since 1994, there is momentum around using the Essential Services framework. It has already been proven to be valuable in assessing organizational capacity, job performances and expenditures. There is more work needed to increase the usefulness of this framework. One promising area is the use of the essential services to identify the general knowledge, skills and abilities (i.e., core competencies) that are needed by public health workers regardless of where they work or their specific role, background or programmatic responsibility. Examples of core competencies include epidemiology, health communications/social marketing, community needs assessment and mobilization.

Table 1. Ten Essential Public Health Services

1	Monitor health status to identify community health problems.
2	Diagnose and investigate health problems and health hazards in the community.
3	Inform, educate, and empower people about health issues.
4	Mobilize community partnerships to identify and solve health problems.
5	Develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts.
6	Enforce laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety.
7	Link people to needed personal health services and assure the provision of health care when otherwise unavailable.
8	Assure a competent public health and personal health workforce .
9	Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services.
10	Research for new insights and innovative solutions to health problems.

Public Health Functions Steering Committee, Public Health in America, July 1995.

As one state health director explained: *“Historically, we’ve generally done a good job of tasks like screening children or treating STDs and TB. We haven’t done as well with some other tasks critical to improving the public’s health, because our people lack the skills to convene and talk to community groups, analyze and explain data, sit at a policy table, or assess community needs.”*

It’s been estimated that almost 4 out of 5 public health workers nationwide are under trained in the disciplines of public health. A major challenge in the 21st century will be to ensure that all public health workers have access to the training and continuing education needed to perform the essential services. Your participation in the “Epidemiology and Prevention of Vaccine Preventable Diseases” contributes directly to competent delivery of the essential services of public health. As part of the public health team your role is broad and more complicated than just providing personal health services, you are part of helping the community create conditions in which everyone can be healthy.

For additional information: <http://web.health.gov/phfunctions/>